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Atari Online News, Etc.
A-ONE Online Magazine
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~ Hackers Sought As Ally ~ "Pump-and-Dump" Spam!   ~ Bloggers To Form Union
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->From the Editor's Keyboard   "Saying it like it is!"
  """"""""""""""""""""""""""""

I don't know what the matter is with me lately, but I really haven't been
in an "editorial" frame of mind lately. Maybe it's the lack of
"controversial" issues, or maybe it's the roller-coaster weather that's
affecting my thought processes. It was really hot and sticky earlier in
the week. Working out on the golf course was really brutal. Even the
occasional thunderstorms didn't help to cool things off. And yes, we do
get off the course during thunderstorms! The latter part of the week was
great for playing golf, though. I played two days in a row - or at least
I went through the motions!

Well, let's move on to this week's issue, so before I get too boring, I'll
stop here so you can get to the good [better] stuff!

Until next time...

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->A-ONE User Group Notes! - Meetings, Shows, and Info!
  """""""""""""""""""""""""

                    ATARI COMPUTER ENTHUSIASTS
                       OF COLUMBUS, OHIO
                 VINTAGE COMPUTER AND VIDEO GAME SWAP MEET

September 8, 2007
9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m. EDT
Oakland Park Community Center
980 Lenore St.

All vintage and classic computers, video games, systems, accessories,
games, and software invited!

Vendor and Flea Marketeer donation: Free!
Shoppers and onlookers donation: Free!

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http://www.angelfire.com/oh4/acec/acec.html

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                         PEOPLE ARE TALKING
                        compiled by Joe Mirando
                          joe@atarinews.org

[Editor's note: Due to the scarcity of newsgroup activity this past week,
there will be no P.A.T. column this week.]

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - New 80GB PlayStation PS3!
  """""""""""""""""""""""""""""""   Xbox 360 Price Cut Coming!
                                     id Unveils "Rage"!
                                     And much more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News   - The Latest Gaming News!
  """"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""

                 Sony Computer Entertainment America Announces
                     Availability of New 80GB PlayStation PS3

Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc. (SCEA) Monday announced the
availability of a new 80GB PlayStation3 (PS3) at online and
brick-and-mortar retailers in the United States and Canada. The system,
available immediately for a suggested retailer price of $599US/$659 CND,
comes with the hit online-enabled off-road racing game MotorStorm packed
in the box.

Featuring an expanded hard disk drive, the new 80GB PS3 is designed to
appeal to the online gaming and entertainment enthusiast, providing ample
storage space to download more games and other entertainment content from
PlayStationNetwork. There are currently more than 60 playable games and
game-related downloads available through PlayStationStore, with expanded
entertainment content coming soon. The new model features the
million-selling game MotorStorm in the box, allowing up to 12 players to

play online at one time, hitting the dirt in this visually-arresting, fast-paced racing title.

"The 80GB PS3 offers expanded options in the PS3 family of products for those who want to enjoy more downloadable content," said Peter Dille, senior vice president of marketing, SCEA. "The new model will provide ample storage space to meet the appetites of those who wish to download content today, and for many more years to come. With the expanded disk capacity and dynamic system upgrades, we have effectively created a system that is 'future-proof', providing consumers an exceptional entertainment value that will stand the test of time."

The 80GB model joins the existing 60GB PS3 that has been available at retail since launch last November. The 60GB PS3 is currently enjoying a surge in sales following a price reduction in the US and Canada on July 9 of $100 to $499/$549 CND. Since that date, unit sales at the company's top five retailers have jumped 113% when compared to the average sales of four weeks prior to the price drop. SCEA will continue to sell the 60GB in the US and Canada at the new, reduced price until current inventory is depleted, which is predicted to be this fall based on current consumer demand.

Throughout the holidays and this fiscal year, more than 120 new first and third-party software titles will be available for North American PS3 users to enjoy, in addition to the more than 40 software titles currently available. Key upcoming first-party titles include Folklore , Heavenly Sword , Lair, NBA '08, Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools of Destruction, SingStar , SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs Confrontation, The Eye of Judgement, Uncharted: Drake's Fortune, PAIN, and Warhawk .

Both the 80GB and 60GB PS3 models come standard with Cell Broadband Engine (Cell/B.E.), built-in hard disk drive, 1080p high-definition output, Wi-Fi connectivity, SIXAXIS wireless controller and Blu-ray Disc player. According to Nielsen VideoScan, there are currently more than 270 high-definition Blu-ray Disc movies available at retail, including the recently released "300," "Shooter," and "Ghost Rider."

Microsoft To Cut Price of Xbox 360

Microsoft Corp said on Monday it will cut the price of its main Xbox 360 video game console model by about 13 percent in the United States, hoping to boost sales ahead of the crucial holiday season.

The move reduces the price of the Xbox 360 Premium model by $50, to $350, and follows a move last month by rival Sony Corp to cut the price of its PlayStation 3 machine by 17 percent, to $500.

Faced with unexpectedly strong competition from Nintendo Co Ltd's cheaper Wii console, Microsoft is aiming at expanding the appeal of the Xbox 360 to an audience outside its core fan base of young men.

"As we look to the holidays we want to bring in more gamers and lower the price for those customers," the Xbox 360's group product manager, Aaron Greenberg, said in an interview.

"We're always trying to bring down cost of the box and ... we always try to pass on the savings to our consumers. We feel like this is the right

time to do it."

The price of the Xbox 360 Core, which does not include a hard drive, will fall $20 to $280 while the Elite model, which features a 120-gigabyte drive, six times the size of the Premium's, will fall $30 to $450. The cuts will take effect from August 8, Microsoft said.

Launched in November 2005, the Xbox 360 has gone 20 months without a price cut, the longest of any console in history. Sony's PlayStation 2 held its $300 price for 18 months after launching in the United States in 2000.

"It surprised me a little bit because there's not a whole lot of market pressure on them to lower the price," said Van Baker, an analyst with market research firm Gartner.

"Is it going to make an enormous difference? No, because when it comes to consoles, it's not the price that sells the console, it's the games that sells the console and from that perspective, Microsoft's in pretty good shape," Baker said.

The rising sophistication of consoles, which boast graphics performance that rivals personal computers costing several times as much, means manufacturers are more reluctant to drop prices. That's particularly true for Microsoft, which has yet to turn a profit on the Xbox business it launched in 2001 in a bid to challenge Sony's growing dominance in the living room.

By the end of June, Microsoft had sold 5.6 million Xbox 360s in the United States, compared with 2.8 million Wiis and 1.4 million PS3s – the latter two launched a year later.

Microsoft forecasts its entertainment and devices division, home to the Xbox, Windows Mobile and Zune digital music player businesses, to turn profitable in its current fiscal year after two years of losses totaling more than $3 billion.

The Redmond, Washington-based company has forecast revenue at the division to grow by between 10 percent and 19 percent this year from sales of $6.08 billion in fiscal 2007.

Greenberg said Microsoft timed the price cut to coincide with the release of Electronic Arts Inc's "Madden NFL 08," the latest installment of the publisher's top-selling football franchise.

"Summer tends to be seasonally slow, but we definitely see a big uptick starting with 'Madden', and accelerating through the end of the year," Greenberg said.

Microsoft is also banking on the highly anticipated final episode of "Halo," its flagship game franchise, to be a major profit driver this year. The game hits stores on September 25.

              "Doom" Creator Unveils Its New Video Game, "Rage"

The creator of classic computer game "Doom," id Software, unveiled on Friday its eagerly anticipated next game, "Rage," in which players fight an oppressive government in a post-apocalyptic world.

The new game will be released for computers running either Microsoft Corp's Windows or Apple Inc's Macintosh operating system, as well as Microsoft's Xbox 360 and Sony Corp's PlayStation 3 video game consoles.

"It's a bit of a classic story and you are the outsider who comes in and tries to turn the tide in favor of good," id Chief Executive Todd Hollenshead said in an interview.

"Rage" is being built with all-new graphics technology designed by id co-founder John Carmack, who showed off the game at id's annual "QuakeCon" event in Dallas, Texas.

Privately held id did not give a release date for "Rage" or the name of the publisher. Activision Inc, the second-biggest U.S. video game publisher, handles other id games such as "Doom 3" and the upcoming "Enemy Territories: Quake Wars."

Since the breakaway success of "Doom" in 1993 established the "first-person shooter" as a major gaming genre, id's games have been characterized by fast-and-furious gunplay and claustrophobic environments.

"Rage" will represent somewhat of a stylistic break by letting players roam expansive outdoor areas.

"In addition to the shooting elements and killing bad guys with cool guns - everyone knows we can do that well - we wanted to show off some stuff that would surprise people," Hollenshead said.

The graphics technology, or engine, underpinning "Rage" is also important since id makes one of a handful of such software packages that are licensed by other game makers.

Hollenshead said the new "tech5" engine would make it easier for developers to design games that are better looking and can be easily modified to run on different gaming systems, a process that normally takes months and pushes up costs.

"It allows a single studio team to make four versions of our game without outside help," Hollenshead said. "You can have massive outdoor environments and make them look glorious down to pixel level without any performance issues."

                    "Madden" Said To Regain Past Glory

Football season is almost here and for U.S. video gamers, that means one thing - a new version of "Madden NFL," which could be back in championship form after a couple of lackluster seasons.

"Madden NFL 08," to hit store shelves next week, promises smoother visuals, finer control over players, and more dramatic gridiron action, such as gang tackles and mid-air hits.

"When you look at how old the franchise is and how long we've been doing it, we are held to a really, really high standard," lead producer David Ortiz said in an interview.

"The industry says, 'Okay, another 'Madden' game, what are they going to show us to make us think this a great game?"'

The franchise, which takes its name from former coach and popular TV commentator John Madden, is a cash cow for publisher Electronic Arts Inc., which has pumped out annual updates for nearly two decades.

Last year's "Madden" sold 5.5 million copies and accounted for about seven percent of revenue for EA, the world's biggest video game publisher.

But many fans felt the series weakened with the launch of more powerful "next generation" video game consoles starting with Microsoft Corp's Xbox 360 in November 2005.

It typically takes a year or two for game developers to get familiar with new technology, and "Madden" for the Xbox 360 and Sony Corp's PlayStation 3 felt unfinished to a lot of critics, some of whom derided the game as "NFL Roster Update" for the perceived lack of significant new features.

"For '06 we had some rough ratings, it was wasn't the biggest shining moment but we figured out the technology ... and this year we think we've come full circle," Ortiz said.

The early buzz about this year's game backs up Ortiz's confidence. For example, last month, "Madden" won the Best Sports Game prize from the Game Critics Awards.

"This is the first real next-gen-worthy version of 'Madden'," said Hilary Goldstein, Xbox editor-in-chief for gaming-focused Web site IGN.

Many expect "Madden" to flatten its closest competitor, "All-Pro Football 2K8" from Take-Two Interactive Software Inc, which came out last month.

"All-Pro" resurrects Take-Two's acclaimed "NFL 2K" series, which died after EA struck an exclusive licensing deal in late 2004. Since it can't use current players and teams, "All-Pro" creates fictional squads manned by famed players of the past.

"While they have some good gameplay and it looks pretty good, it just doesn't have a lot of weight to it. I'd be surprised if they put another one out next year because I think it will sell pretty poorly," Goldstein said.

More than a third of "Madden" sales come in the first two weeks after it hits store shelves, so EA stages extravagant launch events to build more early momentum.

This year EA is working closely with Microsoft, which went so far as to time a $50 price cut on its most popular Xbox 360 model to coincide with the "Madden" debut. The two companies are also holding a New Year's-style bash in New York's Times Square to celebrate "Madden Eve."

"'Madden' is one of those games that emulates film in that we get bigger and bigger budgets and marketing budgets and bigger and bigger splashes the first weekend," said Wedbush Morgan analyst Michael Pachter.

"EA is one of the leaders in recognizing that you've really got to make a splash early," Pachter said. "The 'Madden' launch has become almost a bigger event than the game itself, and that's very smart marketing."

The game will be available August 14 for Xbox 360, Sony's PlayStation 3, PlayStation 2 and PSP handheld, personal computers and for Nintendo Co Ltd's Wii console and DS handheld.

Vid-Games: 'Persona 3,' 'The Darkness'

A huge element of what makes video games so addictive is that they allow you to be something you're not: an NFL quarterback, a high-flying ninja, a spaceship pilot. And since most of us try to behave ourselves in real life, the only place we can be evil - without consequence - is in video games.

The most popular games in which you play a bad guy are Rockstar's "Grand Theft Auto" epics, which make it fairly easy to get away with murder. "Destroy All Humans!" made an alien invader the hero; "Stubbs the Zombie" put you in the shuffling shoes of an undead flesh-eater. Even Nintendo has gotten into the act, letting one of its villains take center stage in the "WarioWare" games.

It's fun to be bad every now and then - within the safe confines of virtual reality.

* "Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3" (Atlus, for the PlayStation 2, $49.99): Your character in "Persona 3" isn't necessarily evil - he's just got a head full of demons who are clamoring to get out and raise some hell. The most disturbing image in the game comes from the way he unleashes the monsters: by holding a gun-shaped "evoker" to his head and pulling the trigger.

The latest in Japan's long-running "Shin Megami Tensei" franchise (the title means something like "true goddess resurrection") follows a group of students who all have the power to awaken the demonic "personae" within their heads. They're also the only people who can stay conscious during the Dark Hour, a nightly episode during which their school turns into a monster-filled labyrinth. The kids' mission is to discover the source of the Dark Hour and prevent the "shadows" from taking over Tokyo.

"Persona 3" offers a satisfying role-playing experience, with challenging battles and an often-surprising story. And it balances the adventure with a "social sim" in which you have to build relationships with your classmates and other people around Tokyo. The stronger your friendships are, the more powerful personae you can summon. "Persona 3" smoothly mixes genres to create one of the PlayStation 2's most memorable RPGs. Three-and-a-half stars out of four.

* "The Darkness" (2K Games, for the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, $59.99): Young mob hit man Jackie Estacado is definitely a bad guy, and he gets even worse when he turns 21 and discovers he is host to the Darkness, an ancient evil that thrives on human hearts. That's not the only bad news for Jackie, who also learns that his crew's boss, Uncle Paulie, wants him dead.

You see all the action through Jackie's eyes, with the Darkness appearing as two snapping, reptilian heads on either side of the screen. The Darkness can chomp on Paulie's henchmen, call on demonic minions or even summon a black hole. But its powers diminish in bright light, so it needs

Jackie to shoot out streetlights and stay in the shadows.

"The Darkness" begins in a grimy, bizarrely underpopulated New York City, but soon shifts to a second location where Jackie learns more about his horrible legacy. It offers an intriguing mix of stealth and first-person shooting, and the Darkness' powers (which increase as the game goes along) add freshness to what could have been a routine urban-crime game. Three stars.

* "Overlord" (Codemasters, for the Xbox 360, $59.99): It's hard out there for an evil mastermind, particularly if you've just been resurrected from the dead and only have a handful of subservient gremlins to do your bidding.

Fortunately, once you start regaining your memory and rebuilding your fortress, more of the imps join your mission. That's important, because your minions do most of the work, and they are fun to watch as they smash obstacles, slaughter innocent animals and leave an impressive trail of destruction.

The controls in "Overlord" are somewhat awkward, and its puzzles are generally obvious, typically requiring you to rally a certain number of minions and then have them rush whatever's in your way. Still, "Overlord" delivers a witty, tongue-in-cheek twist on the sword-and-sorcery genre. Two-and-a-half stars.

Judge Blocks California's Violent Video Game Law

A federal judge ruled on Monday a California law to label violent video games and bar their sale to minors was unconstitutional, prompting Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to say he would appeal the ruling.

California passed a law in 2005 regulating video games with strong support from Schwarzenegger, the former star of many violent action films. Legislators argued violent video games could bring psychological harm and spark aggressive behavior in minors.

The Video Software Dealers Association and the Entertainment Software Association promptly sued to block the law, arguing their games were protected under the First Amendment's protection of free speech.

Judge Ronald Whyte, who had previously granted a preliminary injunction against the law, issued a permanent order that also cited conclusions from judges facing similar laws in other states.

"At this point, there has been no showing that violent video games as defined in the Act, in the absence of other violent media, cause injury to children," he wrote in his decision. "In addition, the evidence does not establish that video games, because of their interactive nature or otherwise, are any more harmful than violent television, movies, Internet sites or other speech-related exposures."

"Although some reputable professional individuals and organizations have expressed particular concern about the interactive nature of video games, there is no generally accepted study that supports that concern."

Schwarzenegger, who once starred in the "Terminator" movies, said he

would appeal the case to the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals.

"I signed this important measure to ensure that parents are involved in
determining which video games are appropriate for their children,"
Schwarzenegger said in a statement.

"Many of these games are made for adults and choosing games that are
appropriate for kids should be a decision made by their parents."

In his ruling, Judge Whyte said he was sympathetic to the goals of the
legislation, but said it improperly set free speech restrictions.

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                        A-ONE's Headline News
                 The Latest in Computer Technology News
                     Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

                        Apple Debuts New iMacs

Apple Inc. updated its iMac computers Tuesday with a slimmer design,
faster chips and glossy screens, hoping to further propel sales that
already outpace the rest of the PC industry.

The all-in-one desktop computers now have aluminum casings, replacing the
white plastic facade that has defined the computer lineup for years. The
new iMacs will come in only 20-inch and 24-inch versions.

With starting prices at $1,199 and $1,799, respectively, the computers
are also $200 to $300 cheaper than their predecessors.

Analysts have been anticipating an iMac revamp for some time from the
trendsetting company. Apple last introduced a new iMac in September 2006
when it debuted the large 24-inch model.

The success of the iPod, Apple's retail stores and the company's switch to
Intel-based computer chips have all helped boost the Macintosh maker's
computer sales and profits to record levels. In recent quarters, Apple's
sales have been growing three times faster than the rest of the PC
industry.

"The iMac has been very successful for us and we want to make it even
better," Apple Chief Executive Steve Jobs said in announcing the new
products.

In the company's fiscal third quarter that ended in June, Apple shipped a
record 1.76 million Macs, up 33 percent from the year-ago period,
accounting for $2.5 billion, or more than 60 percent of the quarter's
revenues.

More than a million of those Mac units were laptops - which also
represents the fastest-growing segment across the PC industry - but most
of the remainder were iMac sales, Apple officials said.

"Notebooks are where there's growth, but I think desktops still have a long life ahead," said Phil Schiller, Apple's executive vice president of worldwide marketing.

Though Apple will no longer offer its older 17-inch iMac model to the general retail market, Apple's chief operating officer, Tim Cook, said the company will continue to sell the computer to educational institutions "for a little while longer."

Apple also upgraded its so-called iLife suite of applications, with a host of new features for its photo management and video creation programs. It also updated its iWork productivity software to include a new spreadsheet program called Numbers - filling a void and perhaps providing some of its customers one less reason to have to buy from rival Microsoft Corp.

Many Mac users often buy Microsoft's Office for Mac software to be able to use Microsoft's Excel spreadsheet program, said Michael Gartenberg, a JupiterResearch analyst.

"They've raised the bar again in terms of functionality," Gartenberg said of Apple.

Lenovo In Talks To Buy Packard Bell

Lenovo Group Ltd., the world's third-largest maker of personal computers, is in talks to buy European PC maker Packard Bell BV from principal owner John Hui, the companies said on Tuesday.

Lenovo is negotiating the deal with Hui, also known as Lap Shun Hui, the former owner of eMachines, another computer maker, Packard Bell said.

"Lenovo is in exclusive talks to acquire Packard Bell," a Packard Bell spokesman said.

He denied a media report that Lenovo was competing with Acer Inc. to buy Packard Bell.

Lenovo said it is also working with other parties or government bodies "in preparation for the entering into of definitive agreements for such proposed acquisition."

Earlier Tuesday, the Hong Kong Economic Journal reported that Lenovo and Acer were both vying for Packard, which Hui bought from NEC Corp. in October 2006.

Acer said in April it planned to buy a PC company in three to five months to win more market share and accelerate growth. The company has declined to identify a potential target, saying only that it would not be a U.S. or Taiwanese company.

Lenovo, one of a handful of Chinese firms trying to forge a global brand by investing abroad, dropped to fourth place globally in the first three months of 2007, but has reclaimed the No. 3 slot from Acer in a closely fought battle, according to data from researchers Gartner and IDC.

Prototype Internet Device Fails FCC Test

The government gave a failing grade to a prototype device that Microsoft Corp., Google Inc., Dell Inc. and other technology companies said would beam high-speed Internet service over unused television airwaves.

In a 85-page report, the Federal Communications Commission on July 31 said the devices submitted by the technology coalition could not reliably detect unused TV spectrum, and could also cause interference.

Despite the setback, FCC chairman Kevin Martin said Tuesday the agency still would like to find a way to transmit high-speed Internet service over the unused airwaves.

Edmond Thomas, who represents the technology coalition, said the companies are convinced the spectrum can be used without causing interference to TV and wireless microphone signals.

"We intend to work with the FCC in order to identify the discrepancies in their tests with the tests we've done," Thomas, who is a former chief engineer with the FCC, said Wednesday.

The technology coalition - which also includes Hewlett-Packard Co., Intel Corp., EarthLink Inc. and Philips Electronics North America Corp., a division of Netherlands-based Royal Philips Electronics NV - said it will work with the FCC to resolve any questions.

The technology companies say the unlicensed and unused TV airwaves, also known as "white spaces," would make Internet service accessible and affordable, especially in rural areas and also spur innovation.

However, TV broadcasters oppose usage of white spaces because they fear the device will cause interference with television programming and could cause problems with a federally mandated transition from analog to digital signals in February 2009.

If the device eventually is approved by the FCC, it could adopt rules for operating unlicensed devices in the white-space spectrum by October, according to its own timetable. By December, the agency could start certifying similar devices, which means manufacturers of the devices must show their technology conforms to the agency's technical requirements.

But any such devices would not go on sale until after Feb. 18, 2009 when TV broadcasters switch from analogy to digital transmissions.

Can Linux Overtake Windows in OS War?

While Novell's CEO is calling for Linux to expand its market, the Linux Foundation's executive director is declaring that the open-source OS is moving into its second stage of growth.

At the LinuxWorld conference in San Francisco, Linux Foundation exec Jim Zemlin told attendees what they probably already knew: The battle for computing platform supremacy is ultimately between Linux and a certain software giant in Redmond, Washington.

"Windows is not going to go away," Zemlin asserted in his Wednesday speech. Moreover, he added, Microsoft deserves respect. The way Zemlin sees it, Microsoft has done a good job executing public relations campaigns and creating doubt about open-source software and the legal issues related to its use.

The Linux Foundation is combating that doubt by adding heavy-hitting legal experts to its arsenal. Karen Copenhaver and standards and consortium expert Andy Updegrove have joined the Foundation's legal team to provide leadership on legal issues affecting Linux.

"Promoting accurate and timely discussion of the legal infrastructure supporting the adoption and deployment of open-source software is key to achieving our core mission," Zemlin said. This is one way the Linux Foundation is protecting the platform as the organization continues to promote and standardize the operating system during the second stage of growth.

The fact that Linux continues to gain market share on desktops, servers, and handsets is undeniable. There are two major reasons for that, according to Charles King, principal analyst at Pund-IT. Both the operating system and the applications that run on top of it are far more user-friendly than in times past.

"On the consumer side, the work Dell is doing with Ubuntu is promising. Ubuntu is gaining a lot of mind and market share as being a user-friendly consumer, nontechnically-oriented Linux OS. It's got some solid basic productivity applications attached to it," King explained.

On the enterprise side, meanwhile, Red Hat is making moves with its JBoss acquisition and Novell and IBM are teaming up to deliver Big Blue applications that play well with SUSE Linux. All this translates to more choices for companies willing to explore the alternatives.

"With Vista, there have been a number of businesses exploring the options in the face of significant investments in hardware to meet the operating system's requirements," King said. "Between Linux and the increasing sales of the Macintosh desktops and even Web-based applications like Google Apps, businesses have more choices today than they've ever had in the past."

Microsoft executives, employees, and shareholders have little reason to stay up at night worrying about Linux taking over, King added. Microsoft still has a commanding lead in the market, he said, but Linux growth is real and should continue to find adoption as a generation emerges that is more technically inclined and less attached to the Microsoft brand.

Google Charges for Extra E-Mail Storage

Forget the battle between Microsoft Word and Google Apps for a minute, and set aside the notion of search engine supremacy. Microsoft and Google are now battling for technology enthusiasts in yet another area: online storage.

This week, Microsoft came out with a twist in the online-storage game, renaming its storage service Windows Live SkyDrive and relaunching it with

a revamped interface. Google, meanwhile, is offering extra storage options on both Gmail and Picasa.

"As someone who tests Google products daily, I know that the simplest solution is often the one that works best," Ryan Aquino, software quality assurance engineer lead for Picassa, wrote in the Google blog. "In the case of online storage, whether it's a picture, a video, or an e-mail, you should just, well, be able to store it without having to worry about whether you've got enough space in each particular product."

On Thursday, Google rolled out extra storage that consumers can purchase to use with two Google products. It begins with Picassa Web Albums and Gmail, but will soon expand to include other applications, such as Google Docs & Spreadsheets.

Google already offers plenty of free storage, and in fact has been increasing the storage limit steadily, launching in 2004 with 1 GB of storage space and doubling that figure in 2005. Today, the free storage limit is 2.8 GB.

But the latest bump in storage will cost consumers. Plans start at $20 a year for 6 GB of space and peak at 250 GB for $500, making Gmail and Picasa together a bona fide online storage solution.

"The fact of life is that every hard drive will fail. You can't put a cost on the value of your photos and your memories, and that's why people are looking for online backup," said Samir Bhavnani, a research director at Current Analysis West, noting that with the new storage offerings Google is attempting to generate a new revenue stream from its existing user base.

Online data backup isn't the sexist of technologies, but Bhavnani said he expects it to be one of the most talked-about sectors in 2008, thanks to the rise of digital media use. There is plenty of competition in various forms. There are free services out there, as well as more robust offerings from large players such as Symantec.

Of course, Microsoft is a player in this area, as is Apple. The global market for managed security services, which includes online backup, is expected to climb from $2.9 billion in 2006 to $3.7 billion in 2008, according to VerticalScope.

As far as e-mail storage options go, Google's main competitor is Yahoo, and Yahoo might have an advantage.

"The Yahoo e-mail program has undergone a lot of good changes over the past couple of years. It offers the online storage, and it offers more of an Outlook-like feel than Gmail," Bhavnani said. "The Gmail program feels very much like an Internet mail program and the Yahoo program feels more like a desktop application."

"Fake Steve Jobs" Blogger Exposed As Forbes Editor

A blogger calling himself "Fake Steve Jobs," whose parody of the Apple Inc. chief executive amused and enthralled Silicon Valley, revealed himself on Sunday as an editor of Forbes business magazine.

Dan Lyons, a senior editor at Forbes, admitted to writing as Fake Steve after a New York Times reporter found resemblances between the blog and Lyons' published work and asked him whether he was behind the long-running satire.

Lyons told the Times he had started the fake blog last year to poke fun at the lack of candidness he saw in the growing number of CEO blogs that were attracting media attention.

Forbes.com confirmed the Times' account and posted an audio interview with Lyons, who lives near Boston and who had managed to evade media sleuths for more than a year.

"I was hoping to stay anonymous for a while longer but on the other hand I knew I couldn't stay anonymous forever. It had to happen at some point," Lyons said.

"I hope that it doesn't ruin the fun of the blog that people know who's behind it.

The blog, http://fakesteve.blogspot.com, has gained a loyal readership for its frequent posts wrapping puerile put-downs and celebrity name-dropping around sharp analysis of business and technology trends.

Fake Steve, also known as "FSJ" or "El Jobso," blasts Linux fans as "freetards" and skewers leading journalists as "filthy hacks" before signing off with the Indian salutation "namaste."

Lyons used his adopted persona to poke fun at Real Steve Jobs' reputation for being a highly demanding, even arrogant, manager, offering gems such as this one:

"The MBAs say you should set high standards, let people know what's expected of them, and hold them to that. I do a little twist on that and say, hold people to an impossibly high standard, but here's the twist - don't tell them what that standard is. And fire them if they fall short."

It has been read by leading industry figures such as Bill Gates, who joked in May when he was introduced at a conference alongside the real Jobs: "First, I want to clarify, I'm not Fake Steve Jobs."

The blog has even spawned an upcoming book by Fake Steve, a satirical novel called "Options" due out in November.

There were numerous attempts to unearth the real Fake Steve Jobs. One of the most concerted came from Nick Denton, founder of blog empire Gawker Media, who turned the search into a personal crusade, poring over Fake Steve's posts for clues about the author's background.

Over the past few months, suspicion turned on a succession of technology writers, each of whom denied being Fake Steve.

One recent suspect, Chicago Sun-Times and Macworld columnist Andy Ihnatko, wrote last month that Fake Steve Jobs was just the latest twist on the Silicon Valley pastime of casting the Apple co-founder as visionary inventor, New Age guru, robber baron or eccentric billionaire.

"The fun of Fake Steve's blog is in celebrating the cultural phenomenon of Bona-Fide Steve Jobs as a cartoon character," Ihnatko wrote.

As for Fake Steve, the blog will move to Forbes' Web site from Monday while Lyons takes a break for a few days. But he did have a parting, presumably joking, shot for the reporter who brought an end to his anonymity.

"You did the sleuthing. You put the pieces of the puzzle together. You went through my trash, hacked into my computer, and put listening devices in my home. Now you've ruined the mystery of Fake Steve, robbing thousands of people around the world of their sense of childlike wonder."

Google Mistakes Own Blog for Spam, Deletes It

Readers of Google's Custom Search Blog were handed a bit of a surprise Tuesday when the Web site was temporarily removed from the blogosphere and hijacked by someone unaffiliated with the company.

The problem? Google had mistakenly identified its own blog as a spammer's site and handed it over to another person.

The change was first noticed by the Google Blogoscoped Web site, which noticed that posts on the Custom Search Blog had been deleted and replaced by a strange comment from someone identifying himself as Srikanth.

"Google Custom Search, is the wonderful product from Google which many webmasters have been looking and dream for," Srikanth wrote. "Also Google Custom Search is integrated with Ad-sense, which means make money while keeping users on your site for longer time with custom search engine.... Good Luck for all the Custom Search customers(??)."

This blog typically offers tips and tricks for users of Google's Custom Search Engine software, which can be used to build customized Web sites that search specific Web sites or pages.

Srikanth's tone was obviously out of character for an official Google blog, prompting Google Blogoscoped to speculate that the site may have been hacked.

The answer turned out to be less sinister, according to Sean Carlson, a Google spokesman.

"Blogger's spam classifier misidentified the Custom Search Blog as spam," he said via e-mail on Wednesday. Typically Google notifies blog owners when it has spotted content associated with spam on their Web sites to give them a chance to clear up any misunderstandings.

However, that didn't work out in this case. "The Custom Search Blog bloggers overlooked their notification, and after a period of time passed, the blog was disabled."

When blogs are disabled like this, their URL becomes available to the general public. That's when Srikanth swooped in and wrote the joke post.

"It was a case of 'URL squatting' and not a security issue or any kind of hack," Carlson said.

Google quickly realized its mistake, and the Custom Search Blog is now

back in action.

Giant 'Pump-and-Dump' Spam Scam Hits Computers

Spammers have unleashed one of the biggest online stock manipulation campaigns in history in the last 24 hours, increasing global spam levels by 30 percent, a leading IT security company claimed Wednesday.

Experts at SophosLabs have detected about 500 million emails containing advice to invest in Prime Time Stores Inc. - an obscure US-listed group - in a record-breaking example of the "pump-and-dump" spamming technique.

"Pump-and-dump" is when spammers buy shares, orchestrate a spam campaign promoting the company, then wait for a share price to rise before selling their stock for a profit.

"This particular campaign was first detected 24 hours ago in Germany and has caused a 30-percent rise in spam worldwide compared to typical levels," said Graham Cluley, senior technology consultant for Britain-based Sophos.

"This is staggering. It's one of the biggest spam campaigns we've ever seen," he told AFP in a telephone interview.

The email cites a company press release announcing the opening of shops by Prime Time Stores in Puerto Rico and goes on to say: "Imagine if you had the chance to buy a Wal-Mart franchise in Mexico right when it first opened its doors there and all you needed was a small stake to get in."

It adds: "Hurry, we see this stock starting to make the turn NOW. Big watch in effect for August 8, 2007!".

Prime Time Stores, which is the exclusive licensee for 7-Eleven convenience stores in Puerto Rico and the Caribbean, did not return calls when contacted by AFP.

The diversified company also has oil and gas, automotive, and mobile phone activities, according to its website.

The stock rose 2.35 percent in morning trade in the United States on Wednesday to 0.087 dollars, but gained 30 percent on Monday and 14.8 percent on Tuesday in the days running up to the detection of the campaign.

"It turns out that it's one of the kinds of spam that actually works," said John Levine, chair of US-based Anti-Spam Research Group.

"There are at least two academic studies that show that the share does go up and the bad guys make money."

Sophos estimates that "pump-and-dump" stock campaigns account for about 25 percent of all spam nowadays, up from less than 1.0 percent in January 2005.

Levine, who is also the author of hit book "Internet for Dummies," says the perpetrators are extremely difficult to catch despite efforts by stock market regulators and police.

"Spamming used to be about guys selling fake viagra from their basements," he said. "Now it's likely to be international crime gangs."

Cluley from Sophos said the share-ramping scams target small stocks, often worth a fraction of a cent, which require only a small increase to deliver big gains.

"They send out fake news about a tiny stock and there are so many day-traders out there that are ready to jump on the bandwagon," he said, referring to amateur investors who play the stock market from home.

The emails promoting Prime Time Stores stock, which are being propagated by thousands of virus-infected home computers whose owners are unaware, has a PDF attachment that contains the investment advice.

The use of a PDF file, a special document-friendly format, makes it easier for the email to slip through spam filters, Cluley said.

Levine has clear advice for anyone tempted to act on unsolicited investment advice sent via email.

"No stranger would ever give you a stock tip for your own good. It was true in the 1920s and it's just as true now," he said.

Fighting Spam, Site by Site

Spammers may have an Achilles Heel.

According to researchers at the University of California, San Diego, antispam fighters could really hurt the spammers bottom line, if they target the Web sites used to host their scams rather than simply trying to block the mail server used to send out unsolicited commercial e-mail.

"If there was more diligence in taking down the Web sites, that would have an effect on overall spam," said Chris Fleizach, a research assistant with U.C. San Diego. "A lot of people using spam to advertise their sites aren't well provisioned," he explained, "so focusing on these bottlenecks would have a deleterious effect on the spam campaign."

Fleizach is part of a research team that recently took a close look at the network infrastructure used by spammers. They concluded that while spammers may use many different servers to send out their e-mail, it's a different story when it comes to hosting the Web page that sells the watches or male enhancement products featured in the spam.

In fact, 94 percent of the time, the scam could be traced back to a single Web server. "Most scams are hosted on a single IP address, providing a potentially convenient single point for network-based interdiction either via IP blacklisting or network filtering," the researcher wrote in a paper to be delivered Thursday at the Usenix Security 2007 conference in Boston.

That's because these Web sites are often run by gray market vendors who need to set up complex e-commerce sites, said Stephen Pao, vice president of product management with antispam vendor Barracuda Networks Inc. "Folks who sell diet pills, folks who sell fake watches, they all need to take credit-card numbers," he said. "And they all need to have central data

centers."

The U.C. researchers monitored over 1 million spam messages over a one-week period late last year, tracing them back to more than 36,000 URLs (uniform resource locators). Using a data analysis technique called image shingling, they were able to identify 2,334 distinct spam campaigns, hosted on 7,029 computers.

Previously used by search engines, image shingling can break down a screen shot of a Web page and analyze its graphical elements.

Researchers found that nearly 40 percent of the time the spammer's Web site was also being used by another spam campaign, suggesting that these machines are often rented out to more than one spammer.

Although browser makers like Microsoft Corp. and Mozilla Corp. have spent a lot of effort beefing up their antiphishing filters this past year, there hasn't been a similar effort to warn people when they're visiting a spam-related site, Fleizach said. "There's no broad community effort to go block sites that are linked to spam, and that may be an important effect that comes out of this [research]."

Enterprise users can block spammer's sites by purchasing Web-filtering products such as those that do "intent analysis" of Web sites, said Barracuda's Pao. But "in general the consumers don't have the tools available for them to do it," he added.

Democratic Candidates See The Light: The Internet

Every U.S. presidential candidate has a Web site, of course, but when the top Democratic hopefuls were asked on Saturday whether they would appoint a White House blogger if elected, all of them said yes.

The candidates' impromptu show of hands at a convention organized by the leading Internet forum for liberal-minded writers on the Internet, DailyKos.com, was tangible evidence of the Web's increasing political sway.

"The Internet is not just a platform for raising money and organizing, it's for everything. Any campaign that isn't using it is lagging behind," said Robert Gibbs, an adviser to Illinois Sen. Barack Obama's campaign.

Many political analysts say the "blogosphere" has injected a more populist sentiment into the eight-way race to become the Democratic nominee next year.

Former North Carolina Sen. John Edwards' campaign has been particularly aggressive, with the candidate's wife, Elizabeth, recently telling The New York Times: "The Internet is the principal way we are communicating with voters right now."

All but Delaware Sen. Joe Biden among the Democratic candidates attended the YearlyKos bloggers' convention this weekend in Chicago.

"I'm aware not everybody says nice things about me" on the blogosphere, Sen. Hillary Clinton of New York joked in addressing a roomful of convention attendees.

"But thank you for being so involved in creating a modern, progressive movement in this country. You've stood up and created an alternative to the right-wing noise machine," said Clinton, who is leading national polls to become the party's nominee.

When the candidates participated in a question-and-answer forum and each agreed to appoint an official White House blogger, former Alaska Sen. Mike Gravel suggested a blog would be one of the next president's most powerful tools.

While the Web is accessible to practically anyone who thinks they have something to say, it offers politicians a medium to disseminate messages unfiltered by what many bloggers view as an increasingly conservative, tightly controlled traditional media.

That seven of the eight Democratic hopefuls would show up at a convention attended by a mere 1,500 people - joined by 250 members of the traditional media - was further evidence that the Web is the medium of the moment.

"You can't win an election with the 10 million people who read blogs. But you are going to get people who will get out there and knock on doors," Markos Moulitsas, founder of convention sponsor DailyKos, said in a telephone interview.

The growing prominence of the Web was on display during last month's YouTube.com Democratic debate on CNN during which the candidates fielded selected questions from regular people, not from reporters.

"Real democracy is messy," Moulitsas said. "Anytime you have a forum like this, you get a few cranks, a few people that are crazy, and a few that are stupid. No one is being excluded."

"All these campaigns need to be close to the blogosphere," Blogtalkradio.com founder Alan Levy said. "They need to get closer to the people to understand what they really want."

Hackers Sought As Allies In War On Terrorism And Cyber Crime

US federal agents are reaching out to computer hackers for help fighting crime and terrorism as a tug-of-war between privacy and public safety continues on the Internet.

The National Security Agency (NSA), the Department of Defense and the FBI were among the spy, military and police agencies represented at DefCon, an international gathering of hackers in Las Vegas.

Hackers and computer security professionals made up the bulk of the more than 6,000 people that took part in the three-day conference which ended Sunday, according to founder Jeff "Dark Tangent" Moss.

Games, contests and seminars at DefCon are devoted to breaching computers, Internet websites, software programs and real-world locks.

Throughout the event money is raised for the Electronic Freedom Foundation, a non-profit legal group that defends online rights and privacy cherished by hackers.

Lawyers from the foundation are spearheading litigation accusing the NSA of illegally snooping on e-mail and telephone communications.

NSA vulnerability analysis chief Tony Sager gave a talk at DefCon, saying the agency was increasingly sharing information with the public in the hope computer wizards wherever they may be become allies in cyber security.

"I'm not sure I can convince them to trust me," Sager told AFP.

"I think we are part of a larger community. In the old days it was about what we found was really precious, because what we had was all there was. Now, it's less important what we find and more important what everybody finds."

It takes the brightest technical minds to fight new-age crime and terrorism, and those people shun government paychecks for "big bucks" in private sector jobs, according to federal agents at DefCon.

While hackers at DefCon socialized warmly with federal agents, two of whom got married on stage during an awards ceremony Sunday, many said online privacy trumps public safety worries.

"The balance of privacy and public safety swung way out of whack with people on the Internet being so trackable," said hacker Len Sassaman, part of a team at K.U. Leuven University in Belgium building an anonymous e-mail system.

"We are trying to swing it back. I don't think police should be able to hit a button and listen to whoever they select; they should have to do some good old boots-on-the-ground work."

Hacker Roger Dingledine is working on an "anonymity network" called Tor that bounces Internet traffic off "about a thousand" computer servers to thwart tracking who is doing what online.

"I believe the need for privacy is fundamental to a working democracy," Sassaman said.

"I err on the side of protecting the hundreds of thousands of people up to nothing bad instead of the few people up to no good."

Federal agents at DefCon said their technology "wish list" includes being able to identify who is responsible for what on the Internet.

"The NSA spent decades trying to do things themselves and that didn't work," Dingledine said. "I'm happy they realize other people can help. I think they know better than to show up and say 'Trust us, we're the NSA'."

Sager said he is not sure how to resolve the conflict between public safety and Internet privacy.

"People don't come to the NSA because they want to fly black helicopters and deny people their liberties," Sager said.

"We happen to be in a time that is very volatile - the whole issue around the war on terrorism and the loss of personal information. I'm not sure there is a logical path right now that will satisfy the majority of the

population."

                    Bloggers Consider Forming Labor Union

Do bloggers need their own Norma Rae?

In a move that might make some people scratch their heads, a loosely
formed coalition of left-leaning bloggers are trying to band together to
form a labor union they hope will help them receive health insurance,
conduct collective bargaining or even set professional standards.

The effort is an extension of the blogosphere's growing power and
presence, especially within the political realm, and for many, evokes
memories of the early labor organization of freelance writers in the
early 1980s.

Organizers hope a bloggers' labor group will not only showcase the
growing professionalism of the Web-based writers, but also the
importance of their roles in candidates' campaigns.

"I think people have just gotten to the point where people outside the
blogosphere understand the value of what it is that we do on the
progressive side," said Susie Madrak, the author of Suburban Guerilla
blog, who is active in the union campaign. "And I think they feel a
little more entitled to ask for something now."

But just what that something is may be hard to say.

In a world as diverse, vocal and unwieldy as the blogosphere, there's no
consensus about what type of organization is needed and who should be
included. Some argue for a free-standing association for activist
bloggers while others suggest a guild open to any blogger - from knitting
fans to video gamers - that could be created within established labor
groups.

Others see a blogger coalition as a way to find health insurance
discounts, fight for press credentials or even establish guidelines for
dealing with advertising and presenting data on page views.

"It would raise the professionalism," said Leslie Robinson, a writer at
ColoradoConfidential.com. "Maybe we could get more jobs, bona fide jobs."

But not everyone is on board.

"The reason I like blogging is that it's very anarchistic. I can do
whatever I want whenever I want, and oh my God, you're not going to tell
me what to do," said Curt Hopkins, the founder of the Committee to
Protect Bloggers.

"The blogosphere is such a weird term and such a weird idea. It's anyone
who wants to do it," Hopkins said. "There's absolutely no commonality
there. How will they find a commonality to go on? I think it's doomed to
failure on any sort of large scale."

About 11 percent of American Internet users have created Web pages or
blogs for others while eight percent have created their own online
journals or Weblogs, according to the Pew Internet & American Life

Project.

With pages focused on everything from bird watching to celebrity footwear, more than 120,000 blogs are created every day and more than 58,000 new posts are made each hour, according to data from Technorati, which tracks more than 94 million blogs worldwide.

Few bloggers are paid for their posts, and even fewer are able to make a living doing the work. But many say they often devote as much energy and time to their online musings as they do to their salaried careers.

While bloggers work to organize their own labor movement, their growing numbers are already being courted by some unions.

"Bloggers are on our radar screen right now for approaching and recruiting into the union," said Gerry Colby, president of the National Writers Union, a local of the United Auto Workers. "We're trying to develop strategies to reach bloggers and encourage them to join."

Unsurprisingly, there's decidedly less support for a union movement among conservative bloggers.

Mark Noonan, an editor at Blogs for Bush and a senior writer at GOP Bloggers, said he worries that a blogger union would undermine the freewheeling nature of the blogosphere, regardless of its political composition.

"We just go out there and write what is on our mind, damn the critics," he said. "To make a union is to start to provide a firm structure for the blogosphere and that would merely make the blogosphere a junior-league (mainstream media). ... Get us a union and other 'professional' organizations and we'll start to be conformist and we'll start to be just another special interest."

But that's not how Kirsten Burgard sees it.

Sitting at a panel titled "A Union for Bloggers: It's Time to Organize" at this week's YearlyKos Convention for bloggers in Chicago, Burgard said she'd welcome a chance to join a unionized blogging community.

"I sure would like to have that union bug on my Web site," said Burgard, a blogger who uses the moniker Bendy Girl.

Madrak hopes that regardless the form, the labor movement ultimately will help bloggers pay for medical bills. It's important, she said, because some bloggers can spend hours a day tethered to computers as they update their Web sites.

"Blogging is very intense - physically, mentally," she said. "You're constantly scanning for news. You're constantly trying to come up with information that you think will mobilize your readers. In the meantime, you're sitting at a computer and your ass is getting wider and your arm and neck and shoulder are wearing out because you're constantly using a mouse."

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